



EFOP-3.4.3-16-2016-00014



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Classroom language

This teaching material has been made at the University of Szeged, and supported by the European Union.

Project identity number: EFOP-3.4.3-16-2016-00014

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BEFKTETÉS A JÖVŐBE

1. Introduction

Whatever teaching method you are going to use, whatever learning theory is going to influence your teaching style the most, one thing is certain: you, the teacher, are going to play a decisive role in the success of the whole teaching-learning experience; your personality, your attitudes, your behaviour and the way you interact with the learners will be instrumental in achieving your teaching, and their learning goals.

Humans are social beings and employ language to interact with each other. We all have to take care what and how we say to our fellow human beings – and this applies to the language the teacher uses in class even more acutely.

In this material you are going to learn about some aspects of the language that the teacher uses in the classroom. The language the students use in the classroom are best discussed dealing with the various aspects of language learning, i.e. speaking, writing, practising grammar, doing a project, etc.

2. Teacher's classroom language: What? Why?



Thinking task

Think back on your language lessons at school and make a list of other kinds of instances of your teacher talking in the lessons: when in the lesson did your teacher talk to you, the learners, and what functions did his or her talk fulfil?



Key

You probably came up with a similar list:

- greeting the students at the beginning and end of the lesson
- asking questions or otherwise eliciting answers from the students
- explaining language use (grammar or vocabulary)
- giving instructions
- giving feedback about an answer or a completed task
- disciplining
- chatting, maintaining rapport, „social oiling“
- telling a story

3. Teacher's classroom language: How much?



Task 1

You are going to watch a video of a CELTA trainer (Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) giving advice to teacher trainees in relation to the *quantity* of teacher talk. Open the following link and watch the first 6:30 minutes, then answer the questions that follow:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUrfRKqs-MY>

1. In what way do students benefit from their teacher talking?
2. What are the drawbacks of too much teacher talk?
3. What are typical mistakes that trainee teachers often make and how should they proceed instead?



Key

1. It serves as a kind of language input and is a valuable source of listening practice.
2. Learners might get bored and disinterested;
Learning a language is a practical skill (like e.g. swimming) so learners need to “do it” – to participate and talk.
3. Due to nerves, trainees often tend to talk too much. The following three scenarios are the most common
 - a) Trainees feel that silence in the classroom is awkward – although it might mean thinking and figuring something out.
Especially at the very beginning, when the students are just silently and expectantly looking at the teacher trainee, trainees are tempted to start talking and talking...
Instead: give *them* something to do immediately. Set up a pair-work activity or some other task to engage them. This will give you a minute to compose yourself.
 - b) commentating – trainees tend to narrate what they are doing
Instead: simply don't do it! It's too much language, most of it they might not understand.
 - c) too polite and thereby too lengthy instructions
Instead: give the briefest possible instruction – and also show them what you mean. You can still be polite by adding “please” and using the appropriate intonation.

4. Teacher's classroom language: Level

Even in everyday situations, we all talk differently to different people. We adjust our speech to the person we are talking to: we choose different vocabulary and structures to speak to a child or an adult, to a friend in a casual conversation or our manager in a formal meeting. This also applies to the language we use to our students.

It seems commonsensical to *adjust the level of our teacher talk to the level of our learners*. There are, however, two practical difficulties involved here.

- 1) Firstly, *it is not at all easy to gauge*, to define exactly, just how easy and simple our teacher talk should be, or in other words, how difficult and complex it can be.
- 2) Secondly, *there are some sneaky difficulties* that inexperienced teachers often don't think about.

As regards gauging the difficulty and complexity of your teacher language, a rule of thumb is offered in **Task 2** that might help you:



Task 2

Look at the various instances of teacher talk in the **Thinking task** above. With some of them it is advisable to *use a language at the same level that your students are at*. They need to fully and comfortably understand what you are saying – with no special effort and as little as possible chance of misunderstanding. In the case of other instances of teacher talk, it is possible and even useful to use language that is *slightly more advanced than the current level of our learners*: a few new words whose meaning can be guessed from the context, as well as structures that they haven't learned yet but are easy to follow in the context. This will stretch their limits and thereby push them forward along the road. An additional benefit is that they will get used to processing language that they haven't learned yet not only cognitively, but also psychologically, which will benefit them in real life, when they are confronted with unedited and unmodified English. Note that we are talking here about *one level higher* than the learners' current level, no more than that! We want to stretch (their understanding), not break (their self-esteem and motivation).

Decide, in which instances of teacher talk is it advisable to use language of the same level as the learners, and in which is it a good idea to stretch their limits. Tick what you consider appropriate:

| | same | higher |
|---|------|--------|
| greeting the students at the beginning and end of the lesson | | |
| asking questions or otherwise eliciting answers from the students | | |
| explaining language use (grammar or vocabulary) | | |
| giving instructions | | |
| giving feedback about an answer or a completed task | | |
| disciplining | | |
| chatting, maintaining rapport, „social oiling” | | |
| telling a story | | |



Key

In most cases it is best for the teacher to use language of the same level as the learner when

- explaining language use (grammar or vocabulary)
- giving instructions
- giving feedback about an answer or a completed task (?)

In most cases it is beneficial for the learning process if the teacher uses language of one level higher than the students' current level:

- greeting the students at the beginning and end of the lesson
- asking questions or otherwise eliciting answers from the students
- giving feedback about an answer or a completed task (?)
- disciplining
- chatting, maintaining rapport, „social oiling”
- telling a story



Task 3

The second half of the above video is about the level of teacher talk. Watch it if you are interested – she has some valuable thoughts on the subject. Take notes.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUrfRKqs-MY>

(6:31-onwards)



Research on the internet:

One of the most decisive figures in ELT is Stephen Krashen, who introduced five basic hypotheses relating to learning a second language. One of them is the input-hypothesis, where he defines the concept of comprehensible input, which he holds as a prerequisite for language learning. Search on the internet and try to understand the concept.

5. Teacher's classroom language: Which language?

Most of the classic methodology literature was written by native speaker trainers to native speaker teachers, who were teaching either groups of diverse mother tongues in an English-speaking country or same-language groups all over the world, whose mother tongue they, the teachers, did not speak. Out of this situation arose the necessity to come up with a teaching methodology in which *the native language of the learners is not needed*.

In much of the English teaching scenario, however, non-native teachers teach groups, who share the same mother tongue, which at the same time is also the native language of the teacher. It is most teachers' conviction and experience that in such a teaching set-up, *there might be valuable benefits of occasionally using the mother tongue of the learners*.



Task 4

Here is the list of some possible teacher talk instances from the above **Thinking Task**. In your opinion, in which of them might it make sense to address the students in their mother tongue? And why?

- greeting the students at the beginning and end of the lesson
- asking questions or otherwise eliciting answers from the students
- explaining language use (grammar or vocabulary)
- giving instructions
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- chatting, maintaining rapport, „social oiling“
- telling a story

6. Teacher's classroom language: Instructions

When setting up an activity, you need to give your learners instructions as to what they are required to do and how. This, however, is not at all such an easy task as it might sound at first hearing. I am sure that if you think back on the times that you were at school, you will recall instances when you were confused what you were supposed to do because you didn't find your teacher's instructions clear enough.

Here are the most important guidelines to follow when giving learners instructions. Study them and try to remember cases when your teachers violated one or the other of them.

Golden rules of giving instructions:

1. When you plan the lesson, plan your instructions as well.
2. Make sure you have the attention of all the learners.
3. Speak to and make eye contact with the whole class.
4. Speak relatively slowly and very clearly, in a confident and decisive tone.
5. Use short and clear sentences, at the language level of your learners.
6. Whenever possible, show them what you want them to do – the page in the book, the handout they are required to use etc. In general, gestures and body talk to accompany your instructions.
7. Demonstrate. Pick a strong learner or a strong pair or group and make them do a trial run. Most people find it easier to do what they have seen someone else doing, than carry out verbal instructions.
8. Don't give many instructions at the same time. Give them one or two – make them do it – and then give them the next one, make them do it etc.
9. Whenever possible, don't hand out materials before you have finished giving your instructions. They will be looking at it instead of listening to you.
10. Check that they understand. 'Do you understand?' is not very helpful. They might say 'Yes' even if they don't or 'No' even if they do.



Task 5

Now click on the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBGFjJvXb1o> and watch the video. Compare the above *Golden rules* with what you hear. Take notes and remember the examples and the tips.

References:

CELTA online teacher training videos:

The ELT training guide to teacher talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUrfRKqs-MY>

The ELT training guide to instructions: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBGFjJvXb1o>